

Jonson's Ode to Shakespeare by Stephanie Hopkins Hughes

What was Ben Jonson actually saying in his dedicatory *Ode to Shakspeare* in the 1623 First Folio?
Let's review:

TO THE MEMORY OF MY BELOVED
MASTER WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE,
AND WHAT HE HATH LEFT US
by Ben Jonson

To draw no envy, SHAKSPEARE, on thy name,
Am I thus ample to thy book and fame ;
While I confess thy [your] writings to be such,
As neither Man nor Muse can praise too much.
'Tis true, and all men's suffrage. But these ways
Were not the paths I meant unto thy praise;

For seeliest* ignorance on these may light,
Which, when it sounds at best, but echoes right;
Or blind affection, which doth ne'er advance
The truth, but gropes, and urgeth all by chance;
Or crafty malice might pretend this praise,
And think to ruin where it seemed to raise.
These are, as some infamous bawd or whore
Should praise a matron; what could hurt her more ?

But thou art proof against them, and, indeed,
Above the ill fortune of them, or the need.
I therefore will begin: Soul of the age!
The applause ! delight ! the wonder of our stage!
My SHAKSPEARE rise ! I will not lodge thee by
Chaucer, or Spenser, or bid Beaumont* lie
A little further, to make thee a room:
Thou art a monument without a tomb,
And art alive still while thy book doth live
And we have wits to read, and praise to give.

That I not mix thee so my brain excuses,
I mean with great, but disproportioned Muses :
For if I thought my judgment were of years,
I should commit thee surely with thy peers,
And tell how far thou didst our Lyly outshine,
Or sporting Kyd, or Marlowe's mighty line.
And though thou hadst small Latin and less Greek,
From thence to honour thee, I would not seek
For names : but call forth thund'ring Aeschylus,
Euripides, and Sophocles to us, Pacuvius*, Accius*,
him of Cordova* dead, To life again, to hear thy
buskin* tread / And shake a stage :
or when thy socks were on*,
Leave thee alone for the comparison
Of all that insolent Greece or haughty Rome
Sent forth, or since did from their ashes come.

PARAPHRASE OF JONSON'S ODE
by Stephanie Hopkins Hughes

It is not to arouse any ill will towards you, Shakspeare,
That I "amplify" [expand upon] your works and
reputation here. Although I agree that your writings are
so great that they cannot be praised too highly, this is
simply a truth about which all men willingly agree, so it
is not for your works that I mean to praise you . . .

since even the most ignorant can see their value. While
"affection"*—which never advances the truth as it can
only blindly grope—will attribute your accomplishments
to Fortune, the comments of the envious, while seeming
to praise you, may actually be intended to harm you.
Praise from such as these will do you as much good as
would praise of a decent woman from pimps or whores.

But you have proven yourself to be above them,
above the harm they did you or any need to get even.
So I will begin by describing you in the terms you
deserve, namely that you are the Soul of the age, the
applause, the delight, the wonder of our Stage. There's
no need to bury you in Poet's Corner!* No need to
move the bones of Chaucer, or Spenser, or Beaumont*,
to make room for you. You need no tomb, for you will
continue to live as long as your plays continue to be
performed and read, and there are audiences wise
enough to understand their value.

Forgive me for mixing you together with so many
and so diverse muses [the ancients, your contem-
poraries, the recently departed], but where you're
concerned the time period doesn't matter. If it did, I
might compare you to your contemporaries, to show by
how much you outshone Lyly, Kyd, or Marlowe, when
it came to writing soaring verse. Although* you had
only a smattering of Latin and Greek, yet I would not
hesitate to compare you with the greatest dramatists of
ancient Greece or Rome, or the poet from Cordova*,
who all would come to life again, to hear your works
for themselves. For when you were in the vein, you
alone could be compared to all the writers that Greece
or Rome have sent us, or any who have followed after
them.

Triumph, my Britain, thou hast one to show
 To whom all Scenes of Europe homage owe.
 He was not of an age, but for all time!
 And all the Muses still were in their prime,
 When, like Apollo, he came forth to warm
 Our ears, or like a Mercury to charm!
 Nature herself was proud of his designs,
 And joyed to wear the dressing of his lines!
 Which were so richly spun, and woven so fit,
 As, since, she will vouchsafe no other wit.

The merry Greek, tart Aristophanes,
 Neat Terence, witty Plautus, now not please ;
 But antiquated and deserted lie,
 As they were not of Nature's family.
 Yet must I not give Nature all; thy art,
 My gentle Shakspeare, must enjoy a part.
 For though the poet's matter nature be,
 His art doth give the fashion: and, that he
 Who casts to write a living line, must sweat,
 (Such as thine are) and strike the second heat
 Upon the Muses' anvil; turn the same,
 And himself with it, that he thinks to frame;
 Or for the laurel he may gain a scorn;
 For a good poet's made, as well as born.
 And such wert thou!
 Look how the father's face
 Lives in his issue, even so the race
 Of Shakspeare's mind and manners brightly shines
 In his well torned and true filed lines;
 In each of which he seems to shake a lance,
 As brandisht at the eyes of ignorance.

Sweet Swan of Avon! what a sight it were
 To see thee in our waters yet appear,
 And make those flights upon the banks of Thames,
 That so did take Eliza, and our James !
 But stay, I see thee in the hemisphere
 Advanced, and made a constellation there !
 Shine forth, thou Star of Poets, and with rage
 Or influence, chide or cheer the drooping stage,
 which / Since thy flight from hence,
 hath mourned like night,
 And despairs day, but for thy volume's light.

Britain, you triumph, since you have given the world
 A being honored by all the theaters of Europe.
 He was not for just his own time but for Eternity.
 Back when the Muses were first being worshipped,
 he came forth, like Apollo, to warm our ears, and, like
 Mercury, to charm us. Nature [?] was proud of his
 poetry and happy to be dressed in his verbiage, so
 much so that he's the only one she cares to listen to.

She no longer cares for Aristophanes,
 Terence, or Plautus, so they are seen as old-
 fashioned. She no longer sees herself in them.
 But I must not attribute all your virtues to Nature,
 For your Art, gentle Shakspeare, is also responsible.
 Although a poet takes his inspiration from Nature,
 It must then be formed by his Art. Those who would
 create living lines and characters like yours, must
 sweat for it, pounding them into shape with rewriting
 as a blacksmith pounds the heated iron on an anvil.
 Without such effort he will never deserve the laurel
 wreath of a poet, for a good poet is made by hard
 work as well as talent.

Just as a father's features can be seen in
 the faces of his sons, Shakspeare's own mind and
 manners can be seen in lines in which he seems
 to shake a lance at eyes
 dimmed by ignorance.

Sweet Swan of Avon!
 What a sight it would be
 To see you once more
 appear in our City, to
 perform your magic
 again at Greenwich and
 Whitehall Palace as you
 once did for Queen Elizabeth and King James.
 But wait! I see that you have been raised to Heaven
 as a new constellation! Shine on us, Star of Poets!
 Come back to us and chide us, rage at us, influence
 us, do whatever it takes to rouse the Stage, which,
 since you left, has remained dark and without hope.





It's clear that Jonson admired Shakespeare immensely. Despite the traces of envy here and in things he said about him to Drummond or wrote in his notebooks, Jonson was a man of taste and intelligence, who, as an excellent writer himself, could not help but be awed by Shakespeare's genius. Although clever and highly educated, Jonson did not often display genuine eloquence, yet here, inspired perhaps by a deepening awareness of his great rival's accomplishment, when he speaks about him he comes close to the language of the Bard himself.

In a dedicatory ode intended to introduce to an eager and adoring public Shakespeare's works in print, the strangely negative tone of these opening lines is usually ignored, probably because there's no explanation for it. Why should anyone think that Jonson would or could "draw envy" to Shakespeare by mentioning his work and his reputation in print? What dark element is there that Jonson must address before he can begin to sing his hero's praises?

If Jonson felt so strongly about Shakespeare and, despite the dangers he outlines at the start, was willing to express it in print, we can be certain that he is also expressing feelings he shared with the men and women who sponsored the true author, who protected his identity during his life, and promoted the publication of his greatest works after his death.

That it took so long to produce the First Folio is testimony to the difficulties that this group faced. Anyone who has ever been involved with getting the rights to a body of work of an important writer so that a complete works can be published (or has followed such a situation, or read about it) will understand what difficulties must have been involved in organizing the publication of the First Folio, particularly if, as we believe, the Authorship Question was already causing problems, or rather continuing to cause them.

What are the difficulties that Jonson treats of at the beginning? He's not exactly being transparent here, which suggests that this part was written for those who knew what he was talking about. That he begins with it suggests that he thought it was important. Or could the tone be due to his public role as chief cynic, so that he felt it necessary to stick to his trademark attitude, at least as an opener?

To draw no envy on thy name

What does Jonson mean when he states that he wishes to "draw no envy" on Shakespeare's name? *Envy* was a word used a lot in the sixteenth century. Apparently a great many people were afraid of the trouble that could be caused by the malice of persons who envy others, who want what they have, something primitive societies envision as "the evil eye." Since the sixteenth-century literary community was well past the primitive stage, why envy should be seen as so dangerous is hard to understand, unless, of course, because it was much easier to get away with dirty tricks, even murder, then than it is now. Since Shakespeare (whoever he was) was dead by 1623, one would think he was out of reach of the envious.

In any case, once past these initial tergiversations, Jonson finally gets down to the business of lauding the man whose book he is introducing, who in another context he claimed he loved "next idolatry."¹

Much of what Jonson says in praise of Shakespeare is transparent and needs no interpreting. There are however two lies, untruths, false clues, or what you will, that he felt it necessary (or was required) to weave into the fabric of his ode in order to shift attention from the true author (and perhaps also from other persons² who were under suspicion by some as the true author) to William of Stratford. That this explains these statements matches the strange cartoon-like portrait engraving that Martin Droeshout worked up for the frontispiece of the book. This engraving may actually look like William of Stratford, although there's no way to tell, since we have no other portrait of him to go by. It certainly looks nothing like anyone else at the time, nor does it resemble any of the images of the Bust in Trinity Chapel, the only others connected with the Stratford author.

A monument without a tomb

However ambiguous elsewhere, Jonson was clear enough when he wrote: "I will not lodge thee by Chaucer, or Spenser, or bid Beaumont lie a little further, to make thee a room; Thou art a monument without a tomb." Or was he?

By 1623, the tradition of burying writers in the South Transept of Westminster Abbey was a quarter of a century old. It was first established in 1599 with the

burial of Edmund Spenser, for whom the site may have been chosen only because the tomb of Chaucer, the greatest poet of earlier times, was located there. The tradition was cemented when a third writer was added, the playwright Francis Beaumont, buried nearby in 1616. Jonson's message throughout this verse and the next is that the book he's introducing, the First Folio, is all the monument that Shakespeare needs. Still, it seems a bit raw to use his Ode to openly deny the Star of Poets his spot in Poet's Corner. Why make a point of it?

Two thoughts seem appropriate here. First, following Beaumont's funeral there may have been a movement to have Shakespeare buried in Poet's Corner. Why not bury the great one in London's most prestigious cemetery, where those who admired him could come to honor him without having to take the long trip to Stratford? Surely Shakespeare deserved this at least as much as Francis Beaumont.

Here's another clue that William wasn't the author, for had he been, there would have been no reason whatsoever to deny him a place in Poet's Corner. Jonson's explanation, that Shakespeare was so great he needs no such recognition, is about as weak as it gets. It's also worth noting that Jonson claims he has no tomb and no monument (other than the First Folio). William died in 1616. Seven years later, was the stone with its doggerel platitude not yet laid in the floor of the Trinity Church? Was the Stratford monument not yet in place? If not, then what did he mean by "thy Stratford monument"? If they were, was he unaware of it? Or was he covering up the truth?

Jonson may simply be using a very old trick in the art of disinformation, namely conveying important information by stating it as a denial. Like Brer Rabbit begging Brer Fox not to throw him in the briar patch that was, in fact, his home, Jonson may be telling those concerned with Shakespeare's burial that if they want to honor him, they can do so by standing on a spot in the Abbey midway between the tombs of Chaucer, Spenser, and Beaumont, whose body, had been moved to make way for Shakespeare. Those who cared about the true author and his legacy were people with great influence who could easily have arranged for a funeral ceremony in the Abbey at night, when it was closed to the public. Beaumont's coffin could easily have been moved to make room for him.

Chaucer's tomb was then, as it is today, an upright structure, but the tombs of Spenser and Beaumont may have been simply plaques with their names set into the floor, as are so many tombs in the Abbey and in Poet's Corner. Unfortunately, there's no telling today exactly where they might have been back then, since all the tombs in the floor have been rearranged many times over the years. Plaques from many eras now sit edge to edge over the entire area. The statue of Shakespeare that now dominates the space was not added until 1740, its likeness based on nothing more than wishful thinking.

But though thou hadst small Latin and less Greek

This line by Jonson set orthodox Shakespeare studies forth on a wild goose chase from which they have never returned. Why did Jonson lie about Shakespeare's erudition and how did he manage to get away with it? How did the obvious knowledge of Plautus, Terence, Euripides, Ariosto, etc., (often in the original, not translation) that Shakespeare reveals in his plays in his many neologisms escape Jonson's readers (those at least who expressed opinions in print) and all orthodox scholars ever since?

Shakespeare was circumspect about his learning. Unlike Jonson, who liked to parade his education, Shakespeare's characters tend to reveal the erudition of their creator obliquely, sometimes by satirizing it as the confused versions that live in the minds of lesser intellects who had learning beaten into them by their grammar school teachers. Like himself, his more advanced characters often reveal their learning through metaphors and descriptive phrases that will be only partly understood without an educated knowledge of his many classical sources.

Why so modest? Was he ashamed of his erudition? Not ashamed, but cautious, as behooved one whose learning so far surpassed even most of his closest associates. And why bother to use references that no one is going to understand? This was true to some extent when he was writing for the Court, but even more so for the Public. And since he obviously wished to remain anonymous, he would have done his best to avoid in his published plays and poems the kinds of classical references that would have made it impossible for those who knew him personally to

remain ignorant of his authorship.

Nevertheless, the very plots and characters of his plays plus a thousand tropes that made up the substance of his work revealed much too clearly, particularly to a literary milieu that was educated in the classics to a degree probably never seen since, the kind of education that could not possibly be ascribed to William of Stratford; not, that is, without some serious tampering with the record. So Jonson had no choice but to lie as forcefully and plainly as possible. Contemporaries may have questioned it privately, but scholarship has declined since then, and scholars of subsequent ages have taken at face value this out and out prevarication. Not that they care about the author anyway since their chief interest in Shakespeare is, always has been, the text.

Jonson then makes up for his monstrous fib by ascribing to Shakespeare a genius that surpasses the “antiquated” Greeks, attributing to him a mystical perfection that lives outside of Time. He also attempts to salve the fact that he is attributing (however obliquely) the greatest works ever written up until then to an illiterate nonentity by claiming that, as their “father,” Shakespeare’s own god-given “mind and manners” shine through his characters and their stories.

Sweet swan of Avon

These are the only words in the entire First Folio that point to William Shakspeare of Stratford-upon-Avon. Although not true, they are not quite a lie. No doubt it was incumbent on Jonson, as Court poet and advocate for the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, to put something in the Ode that connected Shakespeare the poet with William of Stratford, their chosen proxy. If so, this was possibly the least obvious clue he could have dreamed up. Either that or it could be something most easily translated by those who knew the truth, to a reference to the “grand possessors,” the Pembrokes. Pembroke, Jonson’s patron, and his Court circle, could, if they chose, read “Sweet Swan of Avon” as a reference to Shakespeare entertaining the Court community at Pembroke’s home, Wilton, which stands on the bank of the Avon River in Wiltshire. (There are at least nine rivers named Avon in Britain; *avon* means *river* in Welsh.) There is a strong possibility that the true author was present for at least one such produc-

tion in 1603, when the young Earl and his mother, Mary Sidney, Dowager Countess of Pembroke and former mistress of Wilton, were entertaining King James and his retinue before they made their royal way to London. The swan was thought to sing only at its death. Since Oxford would die (or pretend to die) within a few months of that event, the phrase was appropriate in more ways than one. Equivocations are always preferable to out and out lies.

Jonson makes up to some extent for these necessary prevarications by giving us some important clues about the true author and how he worked. Using ironworking as a metaphor, he compares him (and all true poets) to the hardest working of all artisans, the blacksmith, who sweats as he hammers, beating his work into shape. The term “second heat” refers to the phase in metal-working known as *tempering* when, having beaten the metal into its initial form, the smith allows it to cool, then reheats it for another round of beating. Jonson seems to be comparing these rounds of heating and cooling, a process that strengthens the metal, to the rounds of revision required by good writing, revisions being the “Art” that “makes” a writer, even the most innately gifted. Revisions over a period of years is a better explanation for the anomalous topical references and alterations in language in some of Shakespeare’s plays than the theory that these necessarily reveal the work of a co-author or later reviser, as those who see him as a commercial hack would have it.

Shine forth, thou Star of Poets

But the most important clues of all offered by Jonson as to who Shakespeare was and what he actually did, may be contained in his final lines: “Shine forth, thou Star of Poets, and with rage or influence, chide or cheer the drooping stage.” What does he mean by pairing rage and influence, chiding and cheering? Aren’t these pairs duplications? Don’t they mean the same thing? That Shakespeare’s works, returned in their true form in the First Folio, will both condemn what’s wrong with the present and encourage a return to something better? Is he speaking only with regard to the Stage, or perhaps in broader terms, to what the Stage represents, the power to change humanity, to change the way it thinks and acts. Isn’t

“rage” too strong a word for just the pretense of emotion generated by an actor and his part? If we knew that Shakespeare meant, not just to entertain, but to move his audiences to action, what sorts of action would he be advocating? What influence? At what did his pun name manifest: I “will shake [a] spear!” Surely this is what Jonson—who himself got into trouble more than once for his satires—meant by *rage*, *influence*, and *chide*.

Finally, to return to the introduction: regarding the use of the word “envy,” we might note that the initials for Ned (Edward) Vere are NV. Can Jonson’s openingline be read: “To draw no NV on your name”? Is this another instance of stating a fact as a denial? Could he have meant instead to be speaking to those who knew the truth: “To draw NV as your name . . .”?

Are we perhaps reading a little too much into Jonson’s rather peculiar Ode? On the other hand, wouldn’t the true author’s followers be studying Jon-

son’s dedication for just such sleights of hand? Wouldn’t Jonson know that they would be expecting to see their hero acknowledged in the subtle ways he demonstrated so often in his many odes and epigrams, doing a little “sweating” himself to produce something worthy of the greatest wordsmith of them all?

1 A comment made in a private notebook published (1640) after his death (1637) as *Timber* or *Discoveries*.

2 There would have been much discussion of who the true author of the Shakespeare canon was during the first two decade of the seventeenth century. One candidate would certainly have been John Fletcher.

A version of this essay was published in the *De Vere Society Newsletter*, Vol 16 #1, February 2009.

